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ABSTRACT

Black authors have long been telling America about its slave past, although America has apparently not been listening. Frank Webb's novel, "The Garies and Their Friends," was published in the same decade as Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and yet it has never achieved the popularity of Stowe's work, although its characters are well-developed, its scenes are realistically portrayed, and the central theme is adhered to throughout. The question arises, If readers in the United States in the 1850s were interested in reading about the lives of black Americans, why did they not turn to the works of black authors? The answer may be that the novels written by blacks, such as "The Garies and Their Friends," dealt more harshly and realistically with the lives of blacks, both slave and free. Although not without the typical 19th century stylistic flaws, the novel shows that the conflict in mid-19th century America was not primarily one between North and South, but one between black and white. It is a much-neglected novel that should finally get the recognition it deserves as an outstanding 19th century novel written by a black author. (CC)

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The Garies and Their Friends: The Black American Novel Comes of Age

R. Simson

On Sunday, January 30th, 1977 an article appeared in The Syracuse (New York) Herald Journal in which Alex Haley's Roots was reviewed. The author of the article made the following statement:

> Haley has also succeeded in confronting Americans with our history of slavery in a way never done before. At last one reads of real people who were real slaves. We are confronted, too, with the fact of the slave ownership of Presidents Washington and Jefferson.

If the American reading public is finally reading about "real people who are real slaves," it is the fault of the public, not of Black American writers. Throughout the 18th Century and the first half of the 19th Century ex slaves movingly, and often with literary skill and expertise, told of their experiences as slaves. If these were not "real people who were real slaves" we shall never find any. In Roots we are also confronted with "the fact of the slave ownership of Presidents Washington and Jefferson." The very first novel written by a Black American writer is William Wells Brown's Clotel, subtitled The President's Daughter and published in 1853. The story focuses on the slave daughters of Thomas Jefferson. Indeed Black authors have long been telling America about its slave past, but America has apparently not been listening.

The 1850's saw the appearance of four novels by Black American authors:

1853 - Clotel - William Wells Brown
1853 - The Heroic Slave - Frederick Douglass
1857 - The Garies and Their Friends - Frank Webb
1859 (final version 1861) - Blake - Martin Delany

The 1850's also saw the remarkable success of a novel dealing with slavery, but it was none of the above. The author was a Northern white woman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the novel was Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852). In the two years following its publication the presses were never able to keep up with public demand for the book

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and legend has it that when Abraham Lincoln met Mrs. Stowe at a White House reception during the Civil War he commented, "So this is the little lady who wrote the book that made this great war." The overwhelming success of this book is all the more intriguing in view of the literary critiques that it has received. Russel Nye in his introduction to the Washington Square Press edition (1963) of Uncle Tom's Cabin wrote, "It is the work of an amateur who has not yet mastered the tools of her craft, one who has not quite established control over her materials." And John William Ward in his "Afterward" for the Signet (1966) version of Uncle Tom's Cabin wrote, "For the literary critic, the problem is simply how a book so seemingly artless, so lacking in apparent literary talent, was not only an immediate success, but has endured."

The novels of the four Black American authors published in the 1850's never achieved anything resembling the degree of popularity accorded Uncle Tom's Cabin. The question arises, "Why, when the American reading public of the 1850's was evidently clamoring (witness the success of Uncle Tom's Cabin) to read about the lives of Black Americans, did they not turn to the works of Black American authors?" A careful reading of the four novels written by Black Americans during the 1850's gives a clue to the answer to this question. All four novels dealt more harshly and realistically with the lives of Black Americans, both slave and free, than did the sentimental Uncle Tom's Cabin. Perhaps the white reading public of that day (and this) preferred (and prefers) sentimentality to reality.

Of the four novels mentioned perhaps the most neglected has been Frank Webb's The Garies and Their Friends. This is unfortunate because it is a lengthy and complex novel which does a superb job of depicting the lives of not only the slaves of the South but the free Black men of the North.

The story revolves around three families: The Garies, the Ellises and the Stevens. The Garies hail from the South. Garie is a white Southerner who desires to legalize his relationship with his mulatto mistress, Emily, thus making her his

wife and their two children his legal heirs. To accomplish this he moves to Philadelphia where he and Emily do marry, but where they are subjected to all the racial prejudices of the North and meet their end as the victims of a mob. Their two children are separated. The girl, Emily, is raised by a Black family, the Ellises, and the boy, Clarence, is sent off to school to pass for white. When they attain adulthood Emily marries the Ellis son and leads an emotionally and financially secure existence. Clarence dies of grief when his racial identity is revealed to the family of his white fiancée and the family completely rejects him. The Ellis family consists of a Black carpenter (who earns a comfortable living in Philadelphia), his wife and their three children, a son and two daughters. The family is closely knit, yet the individual members possess much personal strength and independence of spirit. The children all succeed in making their way in the world, but the family's life is not without tragedy. The same mob that kills the Garies leaves Mr. Ellis disabled and shattered in mind and body. He never works again nor is he able to actively partake in family life. He remains a physical and emotional invalid. The Stevens family, with the exception of the young daughter, is a collection of villains in the true Dickensian tradition. Stevens, a white lawyer, is a bigotted and totally corrupt individual whose sole interest in life lies in lining his own pocket. When he learns that he and the Garies are related, he decides to gain for himself the inheritance a distant relative has left to Garie. To achieve this goal he manages to arouse an anti Black mob of which he becomes a part and he slays Garie himself. He then bribes a poor client of his, McCloskey, to steal Garies' will. Without Garies' children specifically designated as his heirs, Stevens acquires the fortune for himself. Unfortunately for him he is not able to enjoy his newly acquired wealth. McCloskey constantly threatens to expose Stevens if he does not keep McCloskey supplied with money. Stevens spends his last years as a frightened alcoholic attended only by his daughter. Stevens Jr. comes across Clarence Garie accidentally and reveals his racial background. At the conclusion of the novel McCloskey, on his deathbed, produces Garies' will and the lone Garie survivor, Emily, inherits a

fortune.

Needless to say the novel is not without flaws. Written in typical 19th Century style it contains frequent digressions, sub plots, remarkable coincidences and moralizing. The flaws are mainly those found in a whole generation of novels and when we put them aside, as we have for so many novelists, we have an excellent piece of writing.

Webb intended to show that the conflict in mid 19th Century America was not primarily North vs. South, but Black vs. White. He wanted to show that white prejudice against Black Americans was just as intense in the North as in the South. Webb demonstrated that Black people survived in 19th Century America, not by assimilating with whites or by passing as white, but by establishing their own way of life and adhering to it. To emphasize this point Webb created the strong, independent Ellis family and the wealthy Black businessman, Walters. All of these people are too dark-skinned to pass as whites and they show no desire to be assimilated into white society. Accomodating to positions that whites have assigned to Blacks is unacceptable to the strong willed Black characters in The Garies and Their Friends. When Mrs. Ellis desires her son, Charlie, "go into service" for a white lady, Mr. Ellis, Mr. Walters and even Charlie himself are indignant.

> I won't live at service--I'd rather be a sweep or sell apples on the dock..... I'll cut my own head first.

Mr. Ellis finally consents to let Charlie take the job on the condition that he will definitely return to school after the holidays. After the maiming of his father by the mob, Charlie feels obligated to support his mother and sisters, but he desires a profession, not a menial job. He has a hard time securing the type of position he wants and in a conversation held between two clerks who work for a company which is considering Charlie for employment, the hypocrisy of Northerners is demonstrated.

> 'Engage him!' exclaimed Twining--'why, you surprise me, Western--the thing's absurd; engage a coloured boy as under

> clerk! I never heard of such a thing.'
>
> 'I have often,' drawled Western; 'There are the gweatest number of them in New Orleans..... I must say you Northern people are perfectly uncomprehensible. You pay to have niggers educated, and made fit for such places--and then won't let them fill them when they are pwepared to do so.'

Survival in the white man's world includes fighting if necessary. When Walters learns that his home is about to be attacked by a mob he seeks assistance from the mayor who offers a couple of policemen. Walters rejects this offer.

> Two or three police!..... they would scarcely by of any more use than as many women. If that is the extent of the aid you can afford me I must do what I can to protect myself.

Before the mob strikes Walters gives the following instructions to his friends:

> We are not the agressors, Thank God! And the results, be they what they may, are not of our seeking. I have asked protection of the law, and it is too weak or indifferent to give it; so I have no alternative to protect myself..... Wait for their attack, by all means. If they throw stones, you'll find plenty in that room with which to return the compliment; if they resort to firearms, then we will do the same; I want to be strictly on the defensive--but at the same time we must defend ourselves fully and energetically.

The Ellises show their courage during the attack. Mr. Ellis risks life and limb to warn the Garies of the mob, Esther (the elder Ellis daughter) assists by loading rifles and Caddy (the younger Ellis daughter) and a friend dispel the mob by pouring boiling water filled with several pounds of cayenne pepper "on the heads of the crowd below." Her encounter with the mob leaves Caddy very bitter.

> What these white devils will have to answer for! When I think of how much injury they have done us, I hate them! I know it's wrong to hate anybody--but I can't help it; and I believe God hates them as much as I do.

Walters and the Ellises survive and prosper in the white-dominated Northern states. They do so in spite of, not because of, the white Northerners. One can well imagine that this approach was probably not very heart warming to the white Northern reading public of the day.

The racially mixed Garie family does not fare as well. Their entire life style is an attempt to escape the harsh realities of the society in which they live. In the South they live on a luxurious plantation in a scenic setting. They associate with few people, but Garie's retirement from society was "entirely voluntary, therefore by no means disagreeable." When they arrive in the North they hope for a more social existence, but this does not come to pass and since Garie's retirement from society in his Northern home is not voluntary, he finds it very disagreeable. The Garie children are placed in a private school intended only for whites, but are asked to leave when their racial identity becomes known. Unlike Walters and the Ellises, the Garies don't stand their ground when the mob attacks. Garie cries out, 'We must escape from the house--we are attacked by a mob of demons." He attempts to calm the mob and is shot. Emily and the children escape to a woodshed where she dies in childbirth. Significantly, the new baby, her first to be born on "free" soil is born dead. Little Emily is raised by the Ellises; she accepts herself as a Black woman, is proud of her heritage and prospers. Charlie is sent off to school to pass for white; he is never able to accept or reveal his Black heritage and this proves his undoing.

The white man's Christianity is also given "the once over" by Webb. The white minister who is to perform the marriage ceremony between Garie and Emily refuses to go through with the proceedings. He says to Garie:

> I do not believe in the propriety of amalgamation, and on no consideration could I be induced to assist in the union of a white man or woman with a person who has the slightest infusion of African blood in their veins..... you must be laboring under some horrible infatuation.

After Mrs. Garie's death she is refused burial in the white cemetery, a fact which astonishes and outrages the Garies' white attorney whom Mr. Walters considers quite naive.

> They refuse us permission to kneel by the side of the white communicants at the Lord's Supper, and give us separate pews in obscure corners of their churches. All this you know--why, then be surprised that they carry their prejudices into their graveyards?--the conduct is all of a piece.

Webb is at his best in describing childhood which he handles with a superb blend of realism and nostalgia. When one considers that Tom Sawyer was published in 1876 and Huck Finn in 1884, Webb's marvelous depictions of childhood appear all the more remarkable and our neglect of the Ellis children, the Garie children and Kinch is shameful. Webb was definitely one of the first American authors to capture that fleeting spirit of childhood.

Charlie and Kinch are forerunners of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn respectively. Charlie is the mischievous, young son of concerned parents who, the reader instinctively feels, is, like Tom Sawyer, a "good" boy who will turn into a fine adult. The reader identifies with the mischievous spirit of Charlie's youth and sees in Charlie a revival of his own childhood. Kinch, like Huck, has no adult who is particularly concerned about him. His mother is dead and his father, an old clothes dealer, doesn't bother much about the boy. Like Huck, Kinch is a free spirit and the reader feels somewhat envious of this freedom.

Webb's initial description of Charlie immediately endears the boy to the reader.

> The fact must here be stated that Charlie was not a tidy boy. He despised mats, and seldom or never wiped his feet on entering the house; he was happiest when he could don his most dilapidated unmentionables, as he could then sit down where he pleased..... and enter upon a game of marbles.

Charlie, though a bright boy and a good student, had that aversion to homework so typical of young boys.

> He could not get on with his lessons..... The variously colored states began to form a vast kaleidescope..... In fact he was sleepy.

Kinch is a typical "street urchin."

> His most prominent feature was a capacious hungry-looking mouth..... A cap with the front torn off jauntily set on one side of his head, gave him a rakish and wide-awake air, his clothes were patched and torn in several places and his shoes were already in an advanced state of decay. As he approached the fence he took a piece of chalk from his pocket and commenced to draw (the skull and crossbones on the fence) which was to convey to Charlie the intelligence that he had already passed there on his way to school.

When Kinch learns that Charlie is to "go into service" he gives him some advice. "If it was me I should act so bad that the people would be glad to get rid of me." This advice Charlie decides to follow. He manages to irritate his employer in a number of ways, but the climax comes at a big banquet Mrs. Thomas is holding. Unfortunately the sparsity of Mrs. Thomas' hair compels her to wear a wig and Charlie decides to take advantage of this situation.

> Now to Charlie was assigned the important duty of removing the cover from the soup tureen which was placed before his mistress and the little rogue had settled upon that moment as the most favorable for the execution of his purpose. He therefore secretly affixed a nicely crooked pin to the elbow of his sleeve, and, as he lifted the cover, adroitly hooked it into her cap, to which he knew the wig was fastened and in a twinkling had it off her head..... The guests stared and tittered at the grotesque figure she presented..... In her haste to put it on, she turned it wrong side foremost; the laughter of the guests could now no longer be restrained.

Webb does not confine his descriptions of childhood to humorous interludes. He showed much compassion for the bleaker moments of childhood. Charlie's sister Caddy, in a fit of rage, accidentally pushes her brother down a flight of stiars. He not only breaks a leg, but is dangerously ill for some time. Caddy is in a state of

despair which Webb described as even affecting her compulsion for cleanliness.

> Indeed so subdued was she, that Kinch went in and out without wiping his feet, and tracked mud all over the stair carpet, and yet she uttered no word of remonstrance.

The saddest moment for the Ellis children is the injury done to their father by a mob. Webb captures their unhappiness very well; Charlie even gives up marbles, but they do not despair about the future. On the whole, Webb describes the Ellis children as mischievous, independent and fun-loving. The Garie children, by contrast, are rather sober, dependent and unrealistic. When the racial identity of the Garie children is revealed, they are reluctantly dismissed by the young teacher who has become very fond of them. Clarence doesn't comprehend why he is being rushed out of school. "I hope, ma'am I haven't done anything wrong," he says. When little Emily leaves she says to her teacher, "Don't cry, teacher, I love you..... don't cry. I'll come back again tomorrow." When someone refers to his mother as a "nigger" Clarence is outraged, "My mother is not a nigger any more than you are! How dare you call her such a bad name? I'll tell my father!" When he learns of his mother's death, Clarence's grief is understandably overwhelming. "The cry of grief (that) sprung up from the heart of that orphan boy, ran in those women's ears for long years after."

Webb does a superb job of utilizing children, the most vulnerable and least self sufficient members of society, to show how unjust and downright foolish the race caste systems of North and South were. His children are people any reader can identify with. They like to laugh and play and have fun, but they also possess compassion and are easily hurt. Caddy and Kinch are not cruel children, but in self defense feel compelled to pour boiling water on their attackers. Clarence is a sensitive, loving child, but a cruel world crushes his spirit. Webb expertly guides his characters from childhood to adulthood giving the reader ample insight into why and how they develop as they do.

We are forced to ask ourselves why a well written novel, presenting an extremely well developed and diverse cast of characters, and dealing realistically rather than sentimentally with the lives of Black Americans of the 1850's, has not received more attention than it has. There is no satisfactory answer to this question. Books dealing with a history of Black American Literature more often than not either completely ignore The Garies and Their Friends or mention it only in passing and few articles mention Webb's work either.

Perhaps some of the comments made by Arthur Davis in the introduction to the Arno (1969) edition of The Garies and Their Friends reflect the views of a number of critics and some of these comments need to be disputed. In commenting on Clotel and The Garies and Their Friends, Davis writes, "Neither, of course, is a good novel." What constitutes a "good" novel is largely a matter of opinion and the term "of course" is a bit strong. The Garies and Their Friends meets many literary criteria of what constitutes a "good novel:" the characters are well developed, the events and scenes are realistically portrayed and the central theme is adhered to throughout. In commenting on Webb's portrayal of the free Black people of the North, Davis says:

> We see the little shops of these struggling Negroes; we go to their teas, their reading circles; and above all else, we note their desperate efforts to imitate the best white people in manners, speech, morality and business.

The presumption here is enormous. Must we assume that the speech patterns of all educated Northern Blacks differed basically from that of all educated Northern whites or that the manners and morals of Blacks and whites could not be similar without accusing one race of imitating the other. After all both Blacks and whites were part of a larger social order that governed the entire country and it should not be astonishing that many, if not most people of both races, functioned within that order. Davis goes on to say that

> These free Northern Negroes had

> pride, but it was more of a class than a race pride. They would not have understood the present day Black Power position.

The Ellises and Walters associated primarily with other Blacks, not with whites. When Caddy called the whites "white devils" and stated that she felt God must hate them also was she showing class pride? And in their behavior during the attack by the mob were the Ellises and Walters so very far removed from the doctrine of militancy if necessary? These Black men and women were understandably proud of their accomplishments in a basically hostile environment. Davis comments on Webb's qualities as a protest writer.

> But Webb is not a strong protest writer. The Garies and Their Friends has a tendency to be a 'good will book.' Webb, like Booker T. Washington in Up From Slavery, balances the good and the bad white folks so that they neutralize each other. He depicts a vicious riot scene in which Mr. Ellis is crippled for life mentally and physically, but he offsets this evil through the kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Burrell.

The Garies and Their Friends is a far cry from a "good will book" employing the accommodating tone found in Up From Slavery. How can one "neutralize" the evil done by the Stevens family or "offset" the crippling of Mr. Ellis by a mob in any way whatsoever? Naturally, there were some kindly-intentioned white Northerners. If all whites had been portrayed as being evil, the portrayal would have been unrealistic. There are humane people in all races at all times and it is Webb's strength that he recognized this fact as it adds to the realism of his present action. Davis would have us believe that at the conclusion of the novel, "the villain comes to a bad end, and the 'good' characters are neatly paired in happy marriages." Stevens Sr., it is true, comes to a bad end, but what of Stevens Jr. who reveals Clarence's identity and gives all indications of following in his father's footsteps? Clarence is certainly a "good" character, but the end of the novel finds him dead, a victim of his own grief over a broken romance. And Stevens'

"good" young daughter is lonely and poor at the conclusion of the novel. It is just this lack of a contrived "happy ending" that makes Webb's work a fine and realistic piece of fiction.

It is hard to agree with Floyd Miller who wrote in the introduction to the Beacon edition (1970) of Delany's Blake:

> Delany's novel is clearly the most important black novel of this period (1850's)..... Avoiding the sentimentality of the tragic mulatto theme which intrigued both Brown and Webb, Delany focused sharply on the political and social milieu of the 1850's.

True, Webb introduced "tragic mulattoes" in his novel, but they are hardly the only, or even the most significant characters. And if Webb did not focus on the "political and social milieu of the 1850's," then it is hard to figure out what he did focus on.

Webb's The Garies and Their Friends is a much neglected novel which should finally get the recognition it deserves as the outstanding 19th Century novel to be written by a Black author.